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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to describe conceptions of the usefulness of reading (the function or "why" of reading) and conceptions of the reading process (the form or "how" of reading) among preschool and first grade children in Sweden. The research paradigm used--based on the work of Vygotsky and Piaget--was called the "second order perspective" and centered on how people describe different aspects of their surrounding world. Data were drawn from transcribed clinical individual interviews with 80 preschool children and a follow-up study of 53 children at the end of the first grade. The interviews with the first grade children were supplemented with reading rate, word comprehension, and reading comprehension tests. Results showed that the children described the function of reading in two qualitatively different ways: as a possibility (they see reading as useful for themselves) and as a demand (they see reading as something pressed upon them by others). The children described the process of reading in four different categories: contextual, textual, interactive, and body-related. Overall, the study found that children think a great deal about reading well before they have started school and acquired some reading competence. (FL)

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THE CHILD'S CONCEPTION OF READING

Paper to be presented at the American Educational Research Association
Annual Meeting April 16-20 1986, San Francisco, California, USA.

INTRODUCTION

This study is about reading in general and reading instruction for beginners. The perspective is that of preschool children (5-6 years old) and first-grade children (7-8 years old). We have used depth interviews with 80 children to describe readers' and non-readers' conceptions of the reading-phenomenon.

BACKGROUND TO OUR RESEARCH PROBLEM

Reading and writing abilities are essential skills in a modern society. These basic skills have recently been discussed in Sweden in terms of "the quality of reading/writing performance" and "methods for early reading instruction". The focus of these two discussions is the function and the structure (form) of reading.

The reading ability of school-children was discussed in the seventies and the term "functional illiteracy" was a key term in this debate. Alongside this discussion of the general performance level in reading and writing there was also a debate concerning reading instruction for beginners. Opponents to the so-called "old" synthetic reading methods heavily based on phonics (see Chall's (1967) definition of the term, p 149) argued for a method based on the child's own vocabulary. This "new" method for beginners was labeled analytical and had similarities with the learning experience approach (LEA) and the method presented by Ashton-Warner (1980). During the fifties and sixties in USA reading methods based on meaning and sight learning dominated (Chall, 1967, p 184 f). Methods emphazising code were less common. Chall says after a very ambitious study on reading methods that about 80% of beginning reading instruction in the US in the middle of the sixties is carried out with methods empazising meaning (op cit, p 201 ff). It is interesting to note the difference between the Swedish debate and the "great reading debate" in the USA.

The problem of tackling compulsory education in Sweden interested both laymen, teachers and researchers. One of the research paradigms at our departement offered a promising perspective in which to formulate our research problem and investigation of reading. The research paradigm is called the "second-order perspective" and centers on how people describe different aspects of their surrounding world. The label of the approach is phenomenography (Marton, 1981).

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Our aim is to describe children's conceptions of reading. The study focusses on two main questions: What conceptions do children have about the usefulness of reading and of the reading process? The first regards the WHY-question (function) and the second the HOW-question (form) of reading. Both questions taken together can philosophically, theoretically and empirically be integrated in the superordinate question: What is reading?

THE CHILD'S COGNITIVE PREREQUISITES FOR ACQUIRING OUR WRITTEN LANGUAGE

We present here the discussion between Piaget (from his book written in 1923) and Vygotsky (from his book written in 1934) about the child's early egocentrism and egocentric speech. Egocentric speech is a phenomenon described by Piaget and discussed by Vygotsky. Vygotsky regards egocentric speech as a precursor to what he calls "verbal inner speech" and pure thought (thinking in meanings without identifiable form). Piaget and Vygotsky both identify egocentric speech but draw different conclusions about its origin and functional and structural development.

Vygotsky disagrees with Piaget's assumption that the child's egocentric speech is a symptom of inadequate social adjustment and that the overcoming of this social egocentrism is indicated by a gradual disappearance of the child's egocentric speech.

Vygotsky suggests a different interpretation. The small child is trying to internalize verbal behaviour previously used for direct communication purposes. Egocentric speech can, in his opinion, unveil the development of inner verbal thought. Both the structure and the function of this egocentric speech within such a frame of reference is quite different. The child is directing his speech to himself and not to others. Gradually this language develops into verbal inner speech.

The child's ability to assume the role of others is a central issue in reading and writing. The reader's ability to understand the writer as a person "behind" and "in" the text and the writer's ability to understand the reader's perspective accentuate the role of social egocentrism in thinking. Studying inner speech via egocentric (oral) speech makes it possible to study indications of the function and structure of inner speech. Inner speech and written language handle subject and predicate in different ways. Written language has fully developed subjects and objects while inner speech lacks these aspects. Egocentric speech and inner speech are fragmentary emphasizing the predicate in a specific way. Therefore, they are termed "predicative languages". In this respect, written language and inner speech are quite different from each other. The developing subjectivity of inner speech can be described by the statement: "Intentions taking over at the cost of structure".

These central aspects of the child's "different" languages are vital to the researcher's understanding of the child's comprehension of reading and writing. The child rapidly develops an inner verbal speech during the period of 5-8 years of age. The cognitive process of observing the differences, similarities and possibilities of the "languages" is of importance when learning to read and write.

EARLIER READING RESEARCH IN THE SECOND-ORDER PERSPECTIVE

We have concentrated on studies of how children describe and conceptualize the reading function and the reading process, as our experiential aim is to describe children's conceptions of the phenomenon of reading.

Research on reading in the second-order perspective has two relatively distinct and unrelated traditions, one in England and the other in the USA. The English branch started in 1958 with an article by Reid and was later followed by studies by Downing (1969) and Francis (1973). One characteristic of these studies is that they are based on intense interviews, observations and performance testing of a small number of subjects.

The American tradition started with a study by Denny and Weintraub in 1963 and was followed by Johns in 1971. One special feature of this research is its survey character with short interviews with a few central questions administered to a large number of children. In one interview study, 1655 children from grade 1 to grade 8 participated.

The results of these studies suggest that children starting reading instruction:

> ... lack (of) any specific expectancies of what reading was going to be like, what the activity consisted in, of the purpose and the use of it, of the relationship between reading and writing; and a great poverty of linguistic equipment to deal with the new experiences, calling letters 'numbers' and words 'names' and print 'the reading', and individual letters 'h' for horse.
> (Reid, 1966, p 58)

Another way of expressing this is to say that children don't know what the reading act contains and what use they can make of it. They lack relevant vocabulary for talking about this activity and they are as a consequense of all this cognitively confused.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND THE LINGUISTIC TERMINOLOGY

If you ask a person to describe a language act, this person is likely to reflect on his own cognition. Metacognition related to language produces a metalanguage (a set of linguistic terms used for talking about language). In learning to read children face the difficulty of understanding the content of the so-called "reading instruction register" that is

> ... the special language used to talk about reading and it's relation to speech. Behind this register lies the concepts of language which are used in thinking about reading and the task of learning how to do it. (Downing, 1976).

We find support for the idea that learning written language produces awareness of spoken language as well. This may, in turn, create awareness of the thinking processes and thereby give the child intellectual self-control. (Donaldson, 1978; Ehri, 1979; Francis, 1973; Mason, 1980; Roberts, 1984).

Language competence and language awareness are two different kinds of data levels. The first relates to language used in ordinary lifesituations and the

second to language as an object for reflection. We use a "strong definition" of language awareness as the child is asked to express awareness verbally. This definition might be compared to another where intuitive linguistic choices on different test items is the ground for talking about language awareness (see Torneus, 1983, p 16). In this case you will shift the attention from content to form or to the ability to make language forms opaque.

Our definition of reading awareness is theoretically and empirically related to the child's reading performance.

METHOD

Within a second-order perspective the researcher's aim is to describe the world as perceived by people. Results are presented in categories describing people's conceptions of a certain phenomenon. Phenomenology (Giorgi, 1975) and phenomenography (Marton, 1981) are related in their search for the world as it is perceived but they differ in their analysis of data and presentation of results (Alexandersson, 1981). Phenomenology is directed towards a description of the true invariant meaning of a certain phenomenon while phenomenography describes people's conceptions of a phenomenon in qualitatively different categories. The difference between phenomenology and phenomenography have consequences for the way results can be used in educational practice.

When collecting our data we used a clinical interview method and its criteria for judging the relevance and the reliability of interview data (Piaget, 1977). Piaget adds two further ways of expanding the knowledge of a child's conception of a phenomenon. One is a direct observation of actions and the other is an analysis of children's questions. In our study we make observations on the children's reading "actions".

Vygotsky is critical of the Piagetian aim to look for the attitude of spontaneous thought and the uninfluenced mind of the child (Vygotsky, 1982). The Piagetian aim partly explains why the developmental stage theory has been difficult to adapt to educational practice for other subjects than maths and natural sciences. Vygotsky stresses this difficulty especially for phenomena with a weak structure and an ideological and pluralistic theory base. A context-free description of thinking may be a research goal per se but it is futile for many didactical purposes. The Piagetian problem of "decalage horizontal" seems to Vygotsky to be a distinction between scientific concepts and spontaneous concepts. A person's scientific concepts become conscious within a system while spontaneous concepts refer to actions and awareness necessary in everyday life. "Decalage horizontal" refers to the difficulty of solving logically identical problems in different contexts. This difficulty can largly be explained by referring to the relation between everyday thinking and scientific thinking. Decalage horizontal as a stage-defined developmental problem in thinking is for Vygotsky not an abstruse research question but merely a contextual and didactical one.

The context-dependent variation in answers relates to the educational level of the subject, the ability to understand what is demanded by the researcher, the conception of language, the knowledge of and ability to work through a strictly hypothetical discussion including nothing but the given premises (Luria, 1979). One way of labeling some of these factors is to use the term "interviewcontract" (Rommetveit, 1977). The complete understanding of such a contract includes a description of the context-dependence of a subject's answers.

THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Our data consist of 133 tape-recorded individual interviews with 80 children. The children came from 7 different pre-schools in Gothenburg (the second largest city in Sweden with a population of about 600 000 persons). The participating schools were chosen from the four districts that are administered by the municipal social services. The group consists of approximately the same number of boys and girls. Without being randomly selected the group represents a variety of home backgrounds ensuring differences in conceptions of reading. Preschool is open to every boy and girl one year before starting school (at the age of seven). About 95% of the children make use of the possibility to attend preschool. A follow-up study was administered with 53 of the oldest preschoolers after one year in school.

The preschool study concentrates on questions pertaining to the function and form of reading. The two main questions can be exemplified as follows:

> What reasons do you find for reading/learning to read?
> How is reading done?

The questions were systematically reformulated in a number of different ways during the interview. The conversation began as an open interview and focussed gradually on reading in an "adult manner". The child played with a letter puzzle, wrote a few words, the interviewer read a little story and finally asked some suggestive questions at the end of the interview. By reformulating the two main aspects of reading we made it possible to find a way of studying the permanence in answers during the interview. We present here some of the questions in the interview just to give the reader an idea of the type of questions asked.

> Can you read?
> What can reading be useful for?
> How is reading done?
> What must you do to learn how to read?
> When will you learn to read?

After asking this we read aloud from a book that the child choose himself from the preschool "library". Then we asked the questions again.

We also asked the child "where" and "what" you read in books (texts, pictures, letters, numbers, words) and how to write names and short words with a pencil and a letter puzzle. One part focussed on the relation between real object, picture of object, name of object (spoken and written) and the child's explanations of the relations between these different forms of representation. We studied the child's conceptions of the writing convention (writing direction, words as units, the alphabetic construction and it's basic idea). Finally, we asked some questions appealing to the child's imagination, such as: "What will happen if nobody can read?", "Can the world run out of letters?" and "What is the origin of reading and writing?".

The school interview (53 children out of 61 possible school starters were studied a second time at the end of grade one) concentrated on our two main questions. The child brought the textbook used in the classroom to the interview. 49 out of 53 children had the same primary reader. The other four children had a "language experiance approach" in their first reading instruction. Tests of reading performance were administered. We used one speed test measuring reading speed and type of reading errors and another test

measuring vocabulary and reading comprehension (all tests were standardized and intended for Swedish grade one children at the end of their first year at school).

THE ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWPROTOCOLS

The goal for the analysis of the interviews was to describe the child's conception of reading. The descriptions are presented in qualitatively different categories. The term qualitative does not refer to a classification into "good" or "bad" interview answers. Instead we try to describe different conceptions even if they should be wrong, mythical and biased according to various widely accepted definitions of reading. Our work is entirely focussed on experiential descriptions.

The interviews were written down on paper word by word and afterwards corrected for listening errors. The first step in our work was to identify interviewparts corresponding to the how- and why-questions respectively. By working out tentative schemes for category descriptions the comprehensibility of children's conceptions was sucessively deepened. The two final category systems were tested for reliability by letting another researcher analyze and categorize (the reading function and the reading form respectively) every child. To do this reliability test the co-judge was allowed to use only the description of the categories without taking any example directly from the interviews.

No analysing of the material was done until the total datacollection was finished. We first analysed the preschool answers. Then started the analysis of the answers in grade one. By doing the analysis in this way we could detect qualitative changes in answers during the first schoolyear.

RESULTS

OUR ANSWERS AND THE SCHOOL CONTEXT

If we ask preschool children about the content of school-work in grade one, almost every child mentions reading, writing and maths in that order and importance. Children describe reading as closely knitted to the reading teacher, reading instruction and general school work under the guidance of professional teachers. The school biased answeres marks the importance of starting school and focusses on the relation between pre-school and school. Via the answers on reading we get information of how the child apprehend the schoolstart and schoolwork. In the interviews we found that children mix learning in general with learning to read.

THE FUNCTION OF READING

The children's descriptions of the reading function can be classified into two qualitatively different categories. A: Reading as a possibility and B: Reading as a demand. We will first present the subcategories of A.

A. Reading as a possibility

A1. The child describes reading of different texts as a motive for reading.

The motive has a surface aspect of the function of reading. The child mentions different kinds of textual media such as books, letters, newspapers, slips of paper, TV-texts, signs, labels and game instructions. The answers in the category focus on different reading media but include no notions of reading content.

A2. Reading content as a possibility

The child's motive is the content of what it reads. This use of reading contains descriptions of A2.a: Experiences, A2.b: Information and A2.c: Knowledge acquired through reading. Reading and writing are also A2.d: Means to communicate with other people.

A2 implies category A1 but in this category the child also includes what a reader can do and wants to do right here and now. Immediate usefulness is in the child's focus.

A3. Reading competence as a possibility

The child describes reading competence as a means for other ends. This use implies the primary use (category A2) but stresses different ways of reaching other goals by means of reading competence. This use of reading competence contains descriptions of A3.a: Independence by competence, A3.b: Usefulness in school and A3.c: Usefulness in adulthood.

Answers in category A describe reading in terms of its usefulness. The child explains the reading function by stressing personal usefulness as the most important motive.

The three main A-categories indicate a developmental order. The first describes texts as external objects but disregard the content of what has been read. The second category stresses the content and its immediate usefulness for a reader. Category three implies the previous two and points out the usefulness of reading competence for reaching other goals than just the content of what has been read.

B. Reading as a demand.

A qualitatively different conception of reading is presented by children in category B: Reading as a demand. This category has the same structure as category A but differs in emotional tone. The usefulness of reading is pressed upon the child/demanded by others. Category B reflects the subcategories of A3.

B.a. You must be able to read in order not to bother others. In this category you find a wish for independence but compared to category A.3.a. this wish is verbalized as something pressed upon the child from people in its environment. The wish is not expressed by the child but by others and it is not fully internalized.

B.b. You must be able to read, otherwise you will be teased in the peer-group. The child expresses an emotional feeling of not being fully accepted as an illitterate. This motive is strongly knitted to the self-concept of the child and describes one important aspect of the self-image in the 6-7 year span.

B.c. You must be able to read in school. The child describes that one demand characteristic of schools is their institutionalized right to expect pupils to be able to read and write. We find different conceptions of this and we can define them as myths of reading and schooling. One myth is that you have to read before schoolentrance, otherwise you will not be accepted as a pupil. Another detrimental conception is that you must not read before starting school. You have to make sure you learn how to read in the right milieu and under the guidance of professionals. A third way that the child conceptualizes school and reading is that you will be expelled if you cannot read. Non-readers have a short time of trial to demonstrate their reading ability and, if not successful, they will be expelled.

In category B the child describes how to avoid "threats" by learning to read. The category focusses on the emotional tone subsumed in the expression "reading as a required competence". The child has difficulties in overlooking this emotional stumbling block and expresses the usefulness of reading for himself.

Anxiety related to reading, reading instruction and reading performance is strongly linked to schoolentrance. When we talked about the content of school work with children, they pointed out reading as a very central school activity, that provoke these emotional reactions. Not knowing the "nature of reading" leaves the child with a feeling of insecurity expressed while talking about the usefulness of the reading activity.

The above system of categories concerns the children in preschool and in grade one. For grade one there will be a third main category added to the system of categories of reading function already presented.

C. Improving the reading competence as a motive for reading

The child describes that learning to read and to improve this competence is a motive in itself.

Table 1. Frequences and percentages of children with a certain motive of reading and their changes over age. N=53

Reading motives	Preeschool end of spring before grade one		School end of spring in grade one	
A1. Reading of different texts	10	19%	15	28%
A2. Reading content as a possibility	39	74%	29	55%
A3. Reading competence as a possibility	23	43%	23	43%
B. Reading as a demand	18	34%	5	9%
C. Improving the reading competence as a motive for reading	-	-	17	32%
Don't know	1	2%	-	-

Note! In this and the following tables of changes in conceptions between preschool and school a child can have more than one conception simultaneously in the categorysystem. As a consequence frequences do not sum up to 53 and percentages not to 100%.

Already in preschool 40% of the children described reading and writing as communication acts (table 2). They grasped the functional aspect before they had the actual reading competence. It is remarkable that children in grade one give fever answers of this kind in their descriptions of reading. Reading competence described as a demand from "others" dominates on the other hand, among the answers from the children who have not yet started school. They practically disappear in grade one.

The changing of the percentage in category A1 from 19% in preschool to 28% in school might be explained by stating that such an answer in grade 1 has got another status when you are capable of reading than when illiterate. It is more difficult to explain the change in category A2 by such a simple statement. Let us look more closely on the content of this category to understand the nature of the change.

Table 2. Frequences and percentages of children with a certain motive of reading and their changes over age. N=53

A2. Reading content as a possibility	Preeschool end of spring before grade one		School end of spring in grade one	
A2a. Experiences	18	34%	15	28%
A2b. Information	23	43%	20	38%
A2c. Knowledge	9	17%	2	4%
A2d. Means of communication	21	40%	5	9%

We find quite dramatic changes in the subcategories of A2. Children in grade one although capable of reading express less possibilities of gaining knowledge and using reading as a means for communication than do illiterate preschool children! This result is also strenghtened by the new category C in table 2 "improving the reading competence as a motive for reading" that did not exist in the preschool answers.

THE FORM OF READING

We introduce the descriptions of the reading act by presenting results about children's terminological difficulties concerning the reading instruction register.

Children's understanding of the meaning of the reading terms indicate difficulties to isolate and relate the concepts letter, name, alphabet, number, word and sentence. Names are mixed with letters and are not identified as special words. Letters are numbers and vice verca. The alphabet contains both letters and numbers. Counting and reading are defined as undifferentiated symbolical activities.

Another way of introducing children's knowledge of the reading act is by analyzing and describing their explanations of the relation between pictures and text. Children's preferences for text information are verbalized in three different ways. The first suggests that pictures are made unambigous by the use of text information. The second implies that text information directly tells you what people say, think and act. Text information is also superior to information given by pictures because of its greater importance and usefulness in our society. The child expresses its preference for pictures by saying that pictures are more real and easier to interpret than text information.

THE CHILD'S CONCEPTION OF THE READING PROCESS.

The content of the reading process is described in four main categories A,B,C and D.

A. Context related process of reading

The child describes the reading process as focussed on "things outside or accompanying" the text. The precise meaning of the term "context" within this category refers litterally to the translation of "con textus" which means something "following the text". The contextcategory consist of five subcategories.

A1. The act of reading is described as an external procedure identified by its behavioural characteristics

This conception of reading describes the reader as a person talking, sitting, holding a book, looking at and turning over pages. Texts are presented as objects for these activities but the content of the reading act is not mentioned.

A2. Reading a text presupposes or is facilitated by some relationship to the author

The child suggests that the text must be complemented by some knowledge of the author himself or by some magical effect induced by a close personal relationship (we know each other and are able to understand our written messages as a consequence of this friendship). The usefulness and convention of written language is overshadowed by the child's preference for direct communicative situations in which reading is unnecessary/unpractical and talking essential.

A3. The child conceptualizes reading as a haphazardous "bingo process"

This conception is a pseudotechnical conception of reading and implies the writing of a great number of letters or letter-like constructions that suddenly and by chance "become something" according to external judgements. This conception is very similar to a simple trial-and-error one but with the important distinction that failure and sucess cannot be identified by the child.

A4. The child describes the reading process as identical to an interpretation of pictures

Interpretations and story telling inspired by pictures is identical to the reading act. Sometimes the child totally disregards the text as a vital aspect of reading.

A5. The child describes reading as identical to the reproduction from memory of a story previously read (told)

The child describes the reading act as remembering of texts (a story previously told). This conception is often linked to the interpretation of pictures where the pictures serve as concrete halting-places in a long memory-chain. There is a notion of the importance of the language form. The reproduction is not considered perfect by the child until it is in total agreement with the original version.

Those five contextual conceptions of reading describe the child's fundamental difficulty in understanding that reading depends on texts.

B. Textual conceptions of the reading process

Conceptions previously presented in category A did not contain descriptions of reading as a text-dependent act. Category B describes children's conceptions of various textual techniques. These techniques indicate different ways of apprehending the construction of the text.

Children present two principally different ways of describing the textual construction. They focus on either the visual or the phonetic caracteristics of a text. The first is B1: Focus on the graphic construction of texts and the other is B2: Focus on the phonetic construction of texts. Each of these two textual focuses contain three different strategies called (a) Serial, (b) Integrative and (c) Matching strategies.

a. The child describes the serial strategy as "a process following graphic or phonetic symbols by a step-by-step procedure in the text".

b. The child describes the integrative strategy as "a process of putting graphic or phonetic symbols together in a text".

c. The child describes the matching strategy as "a process of scanning external (text information) against internally stored letter/word pictures or sound pictures".

To sum up the category we can present the following 3 x 2 table

Table 3. Subcategories of the textual conception of the reading process

	GRAPHIC FOCUS OF TEXT	PHONETIC FOCUS OF TEXT
SERIAL STRATEGY	B1.a.	B2.a.
INTEGRATIVE STRATEGY	B1.b.	B2.b.
MATCHING STRATEGY	B1.c.	B2.c.

If we compare those 6 conceptions of reading with how our writing system is constructed we can describe them as possible but not necessarily true ways (in accordance with the alphabetical construction) of performing the reading act.

C. The child describes the reading process as a mental act aiming at content reflection of a text

A shorter way of describing this conception is the expression "interactive conception of the reading process". The relation between reader and text is described as reciprocal. The text presupposes the reader and vice verca. The two main characteristics of this conception is the identification of content in texts and the active reflection upon this content.

D. The child describes the reading act by references to the "reading body" that does the reading

The child indicates that the reading process contains components of visible movements or spoken language. The child suggests the necessity to talk aloud or to move the mouth. The category also contains descriptions of how children conceptualize their development when learning to read. The internalization of reading into a mental act begins in bodily movements which serve as a transition form to true intellectual "brain reading".

Besides categorization of verbal statements the preschool study contains an observation of children's reading behaviour. Those observations were carried out when the child was reading or was trying to read different texts presented during the interviewsessions. By listening to the tape recordings and using other behavioural cues we made a categorization in the same system of categories already presented. This new categorization of reading behaviour did not produce any new categories in our system describing the reading process.

Describing conceptions of reading in grade one resulted, on the other hand, in an expansion of the presented categories of description. Two new categories emerged in the analysis of the follow-up data.

E. The child describes the analysis of text and text-segments into smaller units

We may call this conception of the reading process an "analytical reading approach". The description contains explanations of how to analyze bigger units of written language (words) into smaller ones (letters, sounds). Within the textual category previously presented we find an integrative strategy which is detrimental to this analytical approach.

F. The child describes the reading process by regarding reading as a prerequisite for spoken language

The child conceives of written language as a criterion for describing spoken language. Written language is the ultimate criterion to describe spoken language according to the children. The high prestige of written language, influences the children's attitude to spoken language in a magical way and written language is considered a prerequisite for spoken language.

Among the younger children (from 3 years of age) we get answers suggesting that speech is a central part of the reading process. Those children place spoken language in the same category as reading. Reading is the same as telling a story (context category). In category D (bodily reading) speech equals or precedes reading. The following statement sums up the development of the child's conceptions of the relation between spoken language and reading: Preschoolers equals or see spoken language as a precursor to reading while the school-child think of reading as preceding spoken language.

Table 4. Frequences and percentages of children with a certain verbal conception of the reading process. N=53

Conception of the reading process	Preeschool end of spring before grade one		School end of spring in grade one	
A.Contextual	22	42%	4	8%
B.Textual	36	68%	51	96%
C.Interactive	10	19%	1	2%
D.Motoric	6	11%	-	-
E.Analytical	-	-	2	4%
F.Reading as a prerequisite for the spoken language	1	2%	6	11%
Don't know	3	6%	1	2%

42% of the preschool children give answers categorized as context-related. Those answers are reduced radically in grade one. Textual answers in the preschool are found in two thirds of the interviev records and in practically all interviews in grade one. One fifth of the preschoolers describe the reading process in interactive terms while only one child makes the same description in grade one. The main categories collapse in grade one and every child (exept two) describes the reading process in a textual manner. Changes take place within the textual category and its' subcategories.

Table 5a. Textual conception (verbally expressed) of the reading process among 53 preschoolars

	Graphic focus		Phonetic focus	
Serial strategy	8	15%	3	6%
Integrative strategy	11	21%	4	8%
Matching strategy	10	19%	1	2%

Table 5b. Textual conceptions (verbally expressed) of the reading process among 53 grade one children

	Graphic focus		Phonetic focus	
Serial strategy	8	15%	7	13%
Integrative strategy	23	43%	7	13%
Matching strategy	10	19%	3	6%

(Eight children appears two times in the table. "Outside" this categorysystem there are three children with an undifferentiatied focus and one child with an undifferentiated matching strategy)

A comparison of the two tables above shows that school children gain insight in the integrative strategy and focus the phonetic aspect of the reading process.

In actual reading behavior (observed during reading or reading trials) preschool children demonstrate greater awareness (related to the presented definition of reading) of written language than in their verbal descriptions.

Both verbal descriptions and actual reading behavior are unidimensional regarding textual focus (graphic and phonetic) in preschool. This is not the case in grade one where a child can use parallel graphic and phonetic descriptions of the reading process.

THE ESSENCE OF READING

The empirical results of the functional and the formal aspects of reading are integrated into the essential question: "What is reading?" This essence of reading verbalized by children and integrated empirically presupposes two things. Essence refers to some kind of definition and thereby valuation of conceptions of reading. We use Vygotskys criteria for describing the essence of reading:

> Written language demands a dubbel abstraction: you will have to abstract both from the language phonetical aspect and from the conversation partner.
> (Vygotsky, 1982, p 274)

This definition identifies the formal and the functional aspect of written language. Our use of the definition is wider because we include textual categories focusing graphical aspects of written language as well as phonetical.

Applying this criterion of reading to our empirical material links conceptions of reading to child in a specific way presented below.

When we evaluate conceptions of phenomena we change from a second-order perspective to a first-order perspective. This change indicates new kinds of distinctions in the empirical material.

The criterion of the essence of reading is linked in the following ways to the above categories of describing the two reading aspects:

The functional aspect of reading: Don't-know answers plus category A1 (naming reading media) indicate no expression of usefulness of reading. The child is unable to express anything related to the reading funcion. In category A1 the function is not developed any further than to identifying different kinds of texts that can be read. Category A1 lacks the addendum "in order to". The quantitatively biggest category that demonstrates the child's unawareness of the reading function is category B (reading competence as a demand). The child has conceptualized the reading function but this function is not related to any intrinsic personal use. Genuine and personal use is overshadoved by demands from people and institutions surrounding the child. Those three types of answers taken together constitute our definition of BEING UNAWARE OF THE READING FUNCTION. The other categories of the function aspect taken together constitute our definition of BEING AWARE OF THE READING FUNCTION. In this categorization every child has got only one answer on the functional aspect. We use the first interpretable answer in the open frist phase of the interview. A check is made for the way this answer is thematized throughout the interview. Arguments for doing this kind of judgement on interview answers are put forth by Piaget (1977).

Categories A,B and C in the formal aspect of reading are dealt with in a hierarchical manner. Context-related answers, textual and interactive answers are different steps towards an insight into the formal aspects of reading.

Don't-know, contextual answers and lack of textual and interactive answers define A CHILD'S UNAWARENESS OF THE READING-PROCESS. Descriptions of the reading process based on "things outside" the text disregard the basis of a textual system. The textual and interactive category taken together is our definition of BEING AWARE OF THE FORM OF WRITTEN LANGUAGE.

Children aware of both the functional and structural aspect of reading are defined as being "aware of written language" (the "what" of reading). Children unaware of one or both aspects are defined as being "unaware of written language".

53 of the 61 preschool children were interviewed and tested after one year (at the end of grade one). The grade one children were placed in two groups after a strict application of the test norms of the reading tests. Stanine values less than or equal to 3 were regarded as an indication of poor reading performance. Stanine values greater than 3 were labeled good reading performance.

By this criterion we identified 28 poor and 16 good readers in grade one. Nine of the 53 children in the follow-up study were judged as fluent or practically fluent readers in preschool and were omitted in the analysis.

Table 6. Preschoolers' conceptions of reading (defined as awareness and unawareness of written language) related to their reading performance (defined as results on standardized reading tests) in grade one.

		Observed reading performance in grade one		
		Poor readers	Good readers	Sum
Prediction from conceptions of reading in preschool	Predicted good readers (children aware of written language)	6	15	21
	Predicted poor readers (children unaware of written language)	22	1	23
Sum		28	16	44

In predicting the reading performance of 44 preschool children from their awareness of the written language (function and form taken together) the prognosis is correct in 37 cases. The greatest power of the prognosis is to predict poor reading skill. Poor reading performance in grade one is predicted in 23 cases and observed by testing in 22 cases.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS AND DIDACTICAL CONCLUSIONS

Our results demonstrate that preschoolers (both readers and non-readers) conceptualize reading in many different ways. We find very few children unable to present answers to our questions about reading. Our main conclusion is that children are interested in and think a great deal about reading well before they have started school and acquired some reading competence. Those early conceptions (from about the age of 2-3 year) of reading represent one way of

describing the first steps towards an actual reading competence. Comparing conceptions of reading internationally we find that Swedish preschoolers give much the same answers as preschoolers one or two years younger in other countries (Francis, 1982). Such comparisons indicate that the societal organization of where and when to start reading instruction and the accompanying "common sense conceptions" of reading are implemented in the child "regardless of age".

Starting school is a very important event in a child's life. It's closely knitted to learning to read and to being considered a "grown-up" child. Learning to read and learning to learn is much the same thing in the perspective of a child. The two activities are mixed and mark the importance of how to organise reading instruction for beginners.

By using the above presented criteria for the term AWARENESS OF WRITTEN LANGUAGE we claim that preschool children AWARE OF WRITTEN LANGUAGE have, on the average, greater chances to perform better when they get their first reading instruction than children UNAWARE OF WRITTEN LANGUAGE.

The main didactical question is how to facilitate children's awareness of written language. In other words we try to answer the question of how to integrate the child's spontaneous notions of reading with the corresponding scientific concepts. We use Vygotsky's thesis about the relation between spontaneous and scientific concepts to demonstrate how this might be done. The development of the thinking processes can be described as a simultaneous and complementary process where spontaneous concepts describe a movement from the empirical and concrete to the conscious and conditional and the scientific concepts describing the opposite movement from awareness and conditionality to concreteness and personal experience.

The child's spontaneous concepts must be one point of departure for educational practice. The concept "zone of proximal development" describes the developmental potential of the child and is formed by the span between the spontaneous concepts of the child and what the child can achieve sucessfully by maximal help from adults (Vygotsky, 1982. See also Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976; Saxe & Posner, 1983; Wertsch, 1979).

A guideline in early reading instruction is to recognize that understanding the process of reading and its usefulness is relevant for the child well before the child starts school and learns how to acquire knowledge by reading. All adults must be ready to answer children's questions about reading. This passive guidance of the child should be completed with a milieu where adults take an active part in the child's education.

One major way of achieving greater awareness of written language is to use "metacognitive conversations" before starting the more structured instructions of learning to read. These conversations have to be grounded on a deep understanding of the conceptions held by children about their surrounding milieu of written language. The knowledge of children's conceptions of reading together with a deep insight in the essence of written language may suggest methods for the guidance of children when they start learning to read. Cognitive confusion and emotional stress might be avoided if teachers and other adults considered children's conceptions of reading as equally relevant as their own conceptions.

Our goal is to foster the child to acquire a genuine comprehension of reading and writing as cultural activities aiming at a transmission of messages in a certain way between people in time and space. This might in turn help the child to a kind of reading (and in a broader perspective learning) focussed on meaning and comprehension, a kind of reading that, to quote Vygotsky is "relevant for life".

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The Child's Conception of Reading

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PROBLEM: The aim of the study is to describe conceptions of the usefulness of reading (the function or why of reading) and conceptions of the reading process (the form or the how of reading) among pre-school and first-grade children. Conceptions of these two aspects of reading are integrated to answer the superordinate question: What is reading? Results from earlier research suggest that pre-school children have vague expectancies of both the content and the usefulness of the reading process. The meta-language used when talking about reading raises difficulties. As a consequence pre-school children are confused about reading as a phenomenon.

METHOD: Starting from the work of Vygotsky and Piaget we approach the study of metacognition within a second-order perspective. The approach is labeled phenomenography and aims at describing people's experiences of phenomena. Our data base consists of transcribed clinical individual interviews with 80 pre-school children and a follow up study of 53 children at the end of grade one. The interviews in grade one were supplemented with tests of reading- speed, word-comprehension and reading-comprehension tests.

RESULTS: The children describe the function of reading in two qualitatively different ways: reading as (A) a *possibility* and (B) a *demand*. Reading as a possibility means that reading is described as *useful for the reader himself*. Reading as a demand means that the *usefulness of reading is described as something pressed upon the* child by "others" (peer group, parents, "school").

The children describe the process of reading as four qualitatively different acts: These are (A) *contextual*, (B) *textual*, (C) *interactive* and (D) *bodily*. In A the reading process is guided by "things outside the text or accompanying the text". In B the reading is a textual construction on 1) *graphic* or 2) *phonetic* bases and carried out through one of three strategies: *serial, integrative* and *matching*. In C the reader aims at *reflection on the content of a text*. In D the child describes the reading act as *reading by support of bodily movements*.

The conceptions of the essence of reading (the what of reading) are described by means of a theoretical and an empirical integration of conceptions of the why and the how of reading. The demand category and/or the context category contain preschool *children unaware of the nature of written language*. The possibility category and either of the textual and interactive categories contain preschool *children aware of the nature of written language*. Pre-school children's awareness of reading is related to reading performance in grade one. Poor and good reading comprehension is defined by standardized test norms. Readers in pre-school are excluded from this conclusion analysis. Children aware of the nature of written language in pre-school read, on the average, better in grade one than children unaware of written language. One way of achieving greater awareness of the nature of written language is to use metacognitive conversations about language function and language form in teaching. Cognitive confusion and emotional stress might be avoided in reading instruction for beginners if teachers and other adults considered children's conceptions of reading as equally relevant as their own conceptions.